

Interview with US Ambassador

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In an exclusive interview with Anwar Abdulrahman, the new American ambassador to Bahrain Mr William Monroe speaks in depth for the first time about his government's policies in the Middle East.

We carry his answers in full...

American politics can be confusing and enigmatic - even to Americans themselves! During the 1950s when John Foster Dulles was foreign secretary, coup after coup was engineered by the US to topple elected governments, beginning with Dr Mohammed Mussadeq. Afghanistan followed in 1973 when its constitutional monarchy was brought down, and in Latin America Salvadore Allende, Chile's first elected leader, was murdered by America. Your country's involvement again in Afghanistan, backing the Mujahideen in 1978 preceded the Iraq debacle. You have a history of placing puppets in power, but time always outflanks you. Why is there never any long-term strategy, because even Bush's so called democratisation of the world will be subject to change by the next American president?

Ambassador Monroe: The President has spoken on numerous occasions about the importance of supporting democracy throughout the Middle East and the world. He believes that freedom is the right of every person and that freedom is the hope of every culture. This is a policy that is not only endorsed by the United States, but also other members of the G-8 and countries in the region. During the inaugural gathering of the Forum for the Future, which was held in Rabat and concluded on December 11, 2004, the participants called for specific steps toward implementing various proposals aimed at creating greater economic development, political participation and educational opportunities in the broader Middle East and North Africa. In partnership with the G-8

industrial nations and countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa, the US pledged support for political and economic reforms. At the same time, we acknowledged that all genuine reform must come from within society, not imposed from the outside. I am very pleased that the Kingdom of Bahrain has offered to host the second Forum for the Future in November, 2005, to continue this vital endeavour.

The U.S. also has a track record of selling out its friends. Every American president has had his own personal agenda, which forces any political observer to ask: Is the president independent in his decisions, or is he merely a by-product of the lobbyists who elevated him to the White House? Are US politics formed for the benefit of the American people, or only to reward such lobbying groups, including corporations, financially or politically?

Ambassador Monroe: The U S does not have a track record of selling out its friends, and has numerous long standing relationships in every region of the world. The First Amendment to the U S Constitution, by asserting the rights of free speech, free assembly and peaceful petition for the redress of grievances, provides the legal basis for lobbies in America. Any group in America has the right to demand that its views be heard by the public, the legislature, and the executive branch. Today, there are hundreds if not thousands of lobbying groups and organisations in the US, and each group is working through our democratic system to put forward its agenda. The heart of American democracy - and of any democracy- is meaningful, active participation by its people in government decisions. It is part of our history. As U S President James Madison said back in 1822, "A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both."

Why does the White House still practice double standards? The President says there cannot be proper democracy in Lebanon while it is occupied by a foreign power (Syria). How then does he assess the chances of democracy becoming rooted in Iraq with US forces in full control of everything? With all this in mind, America's honesty as a government or power is always questioned. Your past does not instil confidence. Any Comments?

Ambassador Monroe: The world community, including Russia, Germany, France, and Saudi Arabia, along with the U S, has told the Syrian government that it must end its decades-long occupation of Lebanon. On January 30, Iraq held elections that were free, credible, and legitimate, and the elections advanced the development of a constitution that will embrace the freedom and principles of a democratic system of government. More than eight million Iraqis defied terrorists and went to the polls. The world saw long lines of Iraqi men and women voting in a free and fair election for the first time in their lives. Iraq's Transitional National Assembly convened for the first time and the elected leaders have a mandate to represent all of Iraq's people. The new deputies include more than 85 women. In October, the constitution will be presented to the Iraqi people in a national referendum and another election is planned for December to choose a permanent constitutional government. As President Bush stated in his weekly radio address on March 19, "Iraq's progress toward political freedom has opened a new phase of our work there". America and its coalition partners will increasingly assume a supporting role. In the end, Iraqis must be able to defend their own country, and we will help that proud, new nation secure its liberty. And then our troops will return home."

During the early days of Baghdad's occupation, US forces stood by and watched libraries, museums and galleries looted. The military did not raise a finger while Iraq's wealth and culture was plundered. Any occupier has a moral responsibility to protect these. What is the difference between you and what the Germans did in occupied Europe?

Ambassador Monroe: There are many factors which contributed to the disorder that followed the liberation of Iraq. These include the release of tens of thousands of hardened criminals from Iraqi prisons by the former regime just prior to its fall, the anger on the part of many Iraqis towards the former regime and the institutions which represented it, and the speed of the Coalition military victory in liberating the country. These events took place almost two years ago, and there has been a great deal of progress during these two years, both in Iraq's political development and in efforts to reconstruct the country. The U.S. alone is providing more than \$20 billion in reconstruction aid, and other nations have together pledged billions more in assistance. What is important now is that the international community continues its support for Iraq as it progresses in developing a free and democratic society. The courage of Iraqis in the historic vote of January 30, and the political dialogue of compromise and inclusion which has characterised the period since the elections, strongly suggest that Iraqis are determined to succeed in this effort.

Is the US in danger of using the war on terror to settle old scores? Wouldn't attacks on other Muslim countries spark disaster?

Ambassador Monroe: I'm not sure I understand what you mean by settling old scores. But I can tell you that the international community has responded to the menace of global terrorism with speed and unanimity that are rare on the world stage. The spread of terrorism has been likened to a cancer, exploiting weaknesses wherever it can. Parents and children who were simply enjoying the beauty of a Shakespeare play in Doha last week were targeted by terrorists. How can any terrorist organisation possibly justify such an act? The U.S. policy on this has been clear from the start: we will use all the tools at our disposal - diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence, financial, and the military - to defeat global terrorism.

How can America justify keeping on Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in the face of proven and horrific rights abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay?

Ambassador Monroe: As you know, President Bush was interviewed on Al Arabiya and Al Hurra Satellite Channels immediately after the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, and he told the Arab World that he found the Abu Ghraib prison abuses abhorrent. As the President said, what took place at Abu Ghraib does not represent America, which is a compassionate country that believes in freedom. America sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom. In a democracy, everything is not perfect and mistakes are made. But also in a democracy, those mistakes are investigated and people are brought to justice. President Bush instructed Defence Secretary Rumsfeld to find the truth and then tell the Iraqi people and world. These actions of a few people do not reflect the nature of the men and women who serve our country.

How confident are you that renewed White House forays into Mideast peace-making will be more hopeful? It is after all common knowledge that the US protects Israel financially and militarily.

Ambassador Monroe: President Bush was the first U S President who said that the Palestinians must have their own state, and he has repeatedly called for finding a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The President noted in April, 2004, "...I was the first President ever to articulate the vision of a Palestinian state. No other President has ever done that. I was pleased to do so because I believe that is the best hope for the Palestinian people and the best way to promote peace." The role of the United States will continue to be to urge both parties to make the necessary sacrifices, sacrifices meaning that Israel must withdraw from settlements and there must be territory for a viable Palestinian state. But the Palestinians, on their part, must continue to work hard to fight against any terrorist activities within the territories. The Arab countries bear their own responsibility to work together to help the Palestinian Authority build the necessary structures for democracy. The President said in his State of the Union address in January that he believes peace is at hand and that the U S government will do what is necessary to help move the process forward. The U S believes Palestinian Authority Chairman Abbas wants to develop a state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and security.

How do you answer allegations that your Embassy is meddling in Bahrain's political affairs by embracing certain political societies?

Ambassador Monroe: The Embassy endeavours to meet with representatives from a broad range of Bahraini society. These contacts include, among others, civil society organisations, including political societies, and members of the press like Akhbar Al Khaleej. The U S Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is a Presidential initiative founded to support economic, political, and educational reform efforts in the Middle East and champion opportunity for all people of the region, especially women and youth. The initiative strives to link Arab,

U S, and global private sector businesses, non-governmental organisations, civil society elements, and governments together to develop innovative policies and programmes that support reform in the region. We are proud to partner with Bahrainis, in co-operation with the Bahraini leadership, on these initiatives.

What do you rate your biggest challenge as Washington's new Ambassador to Bahrain?

Ambassador Monroe: I prefer not to think of challenges but rather of opportunities. This is a time of great opportunity in this region. There are changes taking place as the countries of the region grapple with new realities and look for ways to open up their political and economic systems. Our role is to identify and provide opportunities and assistance to those countries, and people in those countries, that want it. And the government and many people in Bahrain have welcomed assistance. The Free Trade Agreement is an excellent example. In signing an FTA, the U S and

Bahrain are creating an opportunity for increased trade and investment in Bahrain. Our assistance under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is another example. Under this initiative, we have offered programmes such as training to assist Bahrain to strengthen its legal system and develop its democratic institutions, as well as internships for Bahraini businesswomen and leadership programmes for high school and university students.

Why is the Free Trade Agreement taking so long to implement? How do you address Saudi's concerns?

Ambassador Monroe: The U S-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement was signed in September 2004 and currently is before the U S Congress for ratification. The Agreement is the United States' first with a Gulf state and only the third with an Arab country. It is an important step toward realising President Bush's vision of a Middle East Free Trade Area by 2013. We anticipate Congress taking up ratification soon, and we hope the Bahraini Parliament also ratifies the Agreement expeditiously. The Agreement represents a great opportunity to expand trade and investment relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain.

It is United States policy to work with each of our friends in the Middle East on enhancing our economic and commercial relations. In that regard, the U S looks forward to continued engagement with Saudi Arabia on accession to the World Trade Organisation and other initiatives related to trade and investment.

Many believe in this country that the US has a policy of encouraging sectarian conflicts in the Gulf. Do you agree or disagree?

Ambassador Monroe: I reject the assertion that the United States encourages sectarian conflict. The United States has a policy of promoting the universal values that Americans share with people around the world - liberty, freedom, democracy, economic development, and educational opportunity. The President and Secretary of State have spoken eloquently about spreading these values globally. Secretary Rice said on January 31, "We have to have change in the Middle East, change based on democratic values, change based on the spread of liberty, because without the dignity and the hope that liberty and freedom bring, we're going to see nothing but the kind of hopelessness that terrorism brings... It's a time, again, when America's values and America's interests are completely linked." The United States, through our technical assistance programmes, seeks to work with the government and people of Bahrain to shape a better future.

What about the future of Iraq? It is devastated. Tens of thousands have been killed, with no security or no reform apart from elections. What exactly is America's vision for the future of Iraq at a time when not a single school, hospital, health centre or road has seen rebuilt? Money has only been spent on securing oil supplies.

Ambassador Monroe: The Iraqi people have a very optimistic view of the future of their country. In an opinion poll taken earlier this month, more than 90 per cent of those polled said that they are hopeful for the future, almost the same number said that they believe life in Iraq will slowly improve, and more than 60pc indicated that their lives today are better than before the war. And there are good reasons for this. To date more than 3,000 schools have been fully rehabilitated, and more than 800 are currently being renovated. 20 hospitals and almost 250 primary health care facilities have either been renovated or are currently in the process of rehabilitation. Hundreds of kilometres of roads have been paved. Cell phone and Internet usage, which were almost non-existent in Iraq before its liberation, have become commonplace. The U S has spent almost \$4 billion to date on such projects, and has more than \$11 billion currently committed to more than 2,000 on-going reconstruction projects in these areas.

The political reform in Iraq has also been remarkable. Opinion polling indicates that 70pc of Iraqis feel that the results of the January 30 elections reflect the will of the Iraqi people. And the Shi'ite-affiliated political majority which emerged from the elections has demonstrated goodwill in reaching out to all Iraqi communities to seek inclusion and consensus in creating the Iraqi Transitional Government which will oversee the writing of a new, democratic constitution for Iraq.

The deaths which have occurred in Iraq since its liberation have been tragic, and in reaction to the mounting toll of terrorist-related killings, Iraqis themselves have become more vocal against terrorism.

There is an historic opportunity for the countries of the region to support the Iraqi people in this time of transition. As Iraq re-establishes its proper political, economic and intellectual role in the region, it will contribute to stability, security and prosperity throughout the Middle East. The countries of the region have a large stake in Iraq's success.

The United States now has zero credibility in the eyes of Arabs and the Third World. In fact, the minute it touches anything, it seems to contaminate. There has been much talk of Bush's preparations to expand his 'war on terror'. So who's next? Iran, Syria?

Ambassador Monroe: As Secretary Rice announced during her recent visit to Europe, we and our European allies are now united publicly in a concerted effort to make sure that Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon because it would be so destabilising to a region that is already very troubled. What we were able to achieve over the last few weeks is a really clear common purpose and common approach with the European Union so that Iran knows that it really has only one choice, and that is to live up to its international obligations not to develop a nuclear weapon under cover of civilian nuclear power. We have a diplomatic path ahead of us. It really now is up to the Iranians to do what they need to do. I've already addressed the issue of Syrian occupation of Lebanon. The President always has his options open, but we really do believe that these issues can be resolved diplomatically.

